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SUBJECT: FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF THE AFGHAN PARLIAMENT

¶1. (U) On December 20, the Afghan Parliament marked its first anniversary with a briefing to the international community and the press in the Wolesi Jirga on the year's progress. The ceremony was attended by almost 100 members of the diplomatic corps, Coalition Force, UNAMA representatives, members of international aid organizations and other VIPs. Inaugurated by President Karzai on December 19, 2005, the Parliament has taken a prominent place in Afghanistan's political life. It serves as a body for discussion of questions that touch the very core of Afghanistan's existence, brings together actors from every faction of the Afghan political spectrum, and has seriously taken up its responsibility to represent constituents from every region in the country. Considering that modern Afghanistan has not had such a deliberative body in decades, and that the seat of Parliament was only a ruined collection of uninhabitable buildings until 2005, the first anniversary marked a major step forward in Afghanistan's political progress towards democracy.

¶2. (U) While they admitted that there are many challenges ahead, Wolesi Jirga Speaker Yunus Qanooni, Deputy Speakers Aref Noorzai and Fawzia Koofi, and Secretary General Ghulam Hassan Gran presented a generally positive and optimistic picture of the Parliament's first year. They pointed to the modern infrastructure, the presence of 91 women among the 249 members of the Wolesi Jirga and the 102 in the Meshrano Jirga, the steps taken to select a Speaker and deputies, the establishment of eighteen oversight commissions in the Wolesi Jirga (three of which are chaired by women), the adoption of Rules of Procedure, establishment of an advisory board and the recognition of (thus far) three parliamentary political groups. They pointed out that the process of confirmation of the Cabinet Ministers, Supreme Court Justices and other high office holders was a decisive demonstration of the checks and balances necessary between the Legislative, Executive and Judicial branches of the government. The Afghan budget had been debated, modified and approved. Key subjects of national importance, ranging from security, anti-corruption measures, development programs and government salaries had been discussed in depth. The Parliament's oversight responsibilities had involved sessions that included 30 meetings with Cabinet Ministers, 14 with Deputy Ministers, and 72 meetings at the level of government department heads. The speakers noted that in its first year, the Wolesi Jirga had received 852 petitions and complaints from the public and was following up action on these appeals with various government offices.

¶3. (U) Oversight responsibilities had included prison visits by commission members, visits to military units, visits to witness the destruction of illegal narcotics and a delegation

visit to investigate civilian casualties in the Panjwayee district of Kandahar Province following military activities there. In the legislative area, Parliament has the responsibility of reviewing all decrees and laws signed after the fall of the Taliban. To date, 100 decrees were in the pipeline, 31 are being studied by relevant commissions and 5 laws have been approved and sent to the President for his signature. The speakers noted the large number of official visits paid on Parliament by foreign government representatives, stressed the ongoing training of the 227 members of the professional staff as well as the MPs themselves, and touched on visits by MPs and staff to more than 20 foreign parliaments. They acknowledged the contributions of the international community to the establishment and ongoing life of the Parliament.

¶4. (U) In conclusion, the Afghan speakers noted that the Parliament was part of the national process of stabilization and improvement, claiming that rule of law and governance were challenges faced by all of Afghanistan, and progress was slow but steady. Representatives of the international community congratulated Qanooni and his colleagues on the occasion of the first anniversary of the Parliament. DCM noted in his remarks that the U.S. looked to Wolesi Jirga members, informed by the views of their constituents, to guide us in making the process of reconstruction in Afghanistan more effective.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Post fully agrees that the Parliament has been a major and generally positive addition to governance in Afghanistan. There are certainly many challenges ahead for this body, including improvement of relations between the Wolesi Jirga and the Meshrano Jirga (the latter did not participate and was not represented at the anniversary

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briefing, and secretariat relations between the two houses can be strained), improvement of capacity and professionalism in the support staff, and improved discipline in the MPs' relations with the Palace and Ministries. In general, however, the Parliament has changed the face of political life in Afghanistan in a decisive way, and the coming year is certain to bring even more changes on the political stage as the Parliament matures. End comment.

¶6. (U) A detailed analysis of parliament's first year of activities will follow septel.

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